

YOUTH AS ASSETS: BUILDING EFFECTIVE YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

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In the adolescent sexual reproductive health (ASRH) field, youth are too often viewed as problems that need fixing. There is an assumption that most youth are actively making wrong choices that lead to adverse public health outcomes (e.g., unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections [STIs], including HIV/AIDS). Although these negative stereotypes persist, increasing numbers of youth-serving organizations and professionals actively promote and incorporate the concept of meaningful youth involvement in program and policy development to help youth become part of the solution to the problems many ASRH program implementers and policy advocates face. Youth involvement itself is viewed as an effective ASRH intervention. The essence of youth involvement is forging effective youth-adult partnerships.

WHAT IS A YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP?

In a true partnership, both parties have the support and opportunity to make suggestions and decisions, and the contributions of both are recognized. In the context of ASRH, youth-adult partnerships can develop while conducting a needs assessment, fundraising, designing a program, training new staff, in service delivery, in implementing ideas and projects, in overseeing a youth program, in collecting data and evaluating or, most beneficially, in all these contexts.

Of course, being willing to share power with youth requires that adults respect and have confidence in the young people who help make decisions. They must be prepared to modify their ideas about what will or won't work. Youth must believe that adults respect their insights and other contributions and understand some of the limitations and realities of developing, running, and evaluating a program or organization.

Often, tokenism appears in the guise of youth involvement and can take many forms. Simply having young people around without any clear role—other than to make adults feel good or to be seen in media reports or advertisements—can leave young people feeling used rather than empowered. The key to avoiding tokenism is to be prepared to share decision-making power with young people.

WHY YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS?

There is evidence that partnering with youth and respecting their ability to make positive contributions can help provide important protective factors for young people. A study conducted by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, a division of the U.S.-based National 4-H Council, concluded that involving young people in decision making provides them with the essential opportunities and supports (i.e., challenge, relevancy, voice, cause-based action, skills-building, adult structure, and affirmation) that are consistently

shown to help young people achieve mastery, compassion, and health.

Many factors influence health behaviors, including knowledge; attitudes; perceived risk, consequences, and social norms; and self-efficacy. Unfortunately, there have been few explicit linkages between the resiliency research and the youth-adult partnership movement. However, many of the factors that research has found to help young people resist stress and negative situations are produced in, and facilitated by, effective youth-adult partnerships. Behavior-change theories and research on resiliency suggests that while the kinds of activities offered by successful youth development programs vary, the emphasis lies in providing opportunities for active participation and real challenges. Few things can more convincingly and concretely demonstrate the belief in young people's capabilities than trusted adults sharing decision-making power with them.

Resiliency research has identified the following protective factors that seem to account for the difference between young people who emerge from high-risk situations with positive results and those who do not become healthy and happy adults. These factors include *Social Competence* (responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, communication skills, a sense of humor); *Problem-Solving Skills* (ability to think abstractly and to arrive at alternative solutions for problems); *Autonomy* (individual identity and ability to act independently); *Sense of Purpose and Future* (healthy expectations, goals, success orientation, educational aspirations, and hopefulness).

Along with a caring and supportive environment and high expectations, opportunities for meaningful involvement and participation are the most important factors that seem to contribute to resilient children. The development of an internal locus of control, or the ability to have an impact on the environment or on others, is a key protective factor found in resilient young people.

What Are Important Elements of Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships?

- Establish clear goals. Youth and adults must understand what their roles and responsibilities will be and enter into the partnership of their own free will.
- Be prepared to share power in order to avoid tokenizing youth.
- Try to elicit “buy-in” or a commitment from the highest levels of the organization.
- Be selective. Not all adults can or want to work with youth; similarly, not all youth can or want to work with adults in a given capacity. Being clear about the goals and roles in the partnership can attract young people who are committed, reliable, and effective. Adult leaders should believe that young people are assets and be willing to advocate for them in the face of negative stereotyping.
- Include training and skills-building to maximize the contributions of youth and adults.
- Resolve conflicts about communication and expectations by asking questions and keeping in mind the common goals.
- Have high expectations of youth, and hold them accountable for their responsibilities.
- Value adult participation. Adults frequently have more knowledge, experience, and access to resources. Guard against discounting the potential of other adult allies or assuming that all adults believe the negative stereotypes about young people.

Include room for growth—what are the next steps? Peer education programs are often great vehicles for empowering young people and helping them develop important skills. Often, however, they do not include stages of advancement that allow room for more experienced young people to assume more responsibility.